



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Harlem in Furs: Race and Fashion in the Photography of Gordon Parks

Jesús Costantino

Modernism/modernity, Volume 23, Number 4, November 2016, pp. 789-811 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2016.0074>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/643188>



## Harlem in Furs: Race and Fashion in the Photography of Gordon Parks

Jesús Costantino

As the first African-American working as a commercial fashion photographer for mainstream outlets like *Vogue* and *Life* and a veteran of Roy Stryker's photography division at the Farm Security Administration, Gordon Parks documented the underappreciated visual history binding consumer culture to racial politics. Never one to shy away from on-the-nose social commentary or obvious political allegory, Parks has been seen as an important—but frustratingly unsubtle—middlebrow African-American photographer.<sup>1</sup> This is as true of his documentary images of black American life as it is of his commercial fashion photography. The fact that Parks also worked as a staff photographer for *Life* magazine for twenty years is often made to serve as irrefutable proof of his moderate politics and heavy-handed social commentary.<sup>2</sup> However, I intend in this article to put pressure on this assumption. I argue that what has been mistaken for political moderation in Parks's work is instead a direct engagement with the violence of self-evidence that ultimately undergirds bourgeois culture and politics.

Working in the visual idiom of the middle class, Parks found a broad audience for his documentary photography as well as his fashion photography. By examining both types of Parks's photography alongside one another, I intend to highlight the ways in which each stands out for its unapologetic engagement with the middle-class white Americans whom Martin Luther King, Jr. would deem “the Negro's great stumbling block.”<sup>3</sup> Parks spoke the visual language of the white middle class.<sup>4</sup> His photography

MODERNISM / *modernity*  
VOLUME TWENTY THREE,  
NUMBER FOUR,  
PP 789–811. © 2016  
JOHNS HOPKINS  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**Jesús Costantino** is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of New Mexico. He is completing his first book, *Fighting Form: Boxing, Abstraction, and American Visual Politics, 1880–1950*, which remaps the racial history of modernist abstraction by way of its entanglements in American boxing.



790 gives voice to what Louis Althusser calls the “false obviousness of everyday practice” that runs through photographic depictions of both fashion and African-American life.<sup>5</sup> Far from a personal indulgence or financial necessity, Parks’s involvement in the fashion industry was, counter-intuitively, what gave his documentary work its political force, an impact that resonated powerfully in the visual history of the civil rights movement. From his earliest photography to his late-career work, Parks strategically vacillated between images of racial inequality and commercial fashion—sometimes within the same issue of a magazine—blending two subjects at the forefront of the American bourgeois visual imagination. By moving between these two subjects in his photography, Parks attempted to find, in a necessarily two-pronged approach, a lasting visual idiom of black American representation within the language of consumerist self-expression. In his photographs of midcentury women’s middle-class fashions and of the material conditions of African-Americans in the 1940s and 1950s, Parks pointed to the ways in which consumerism and bourgeois racial epistemology hinge on a shared belief in the politics of self-fashioning.

The belief that what one wears expresses one’s interior life was, for Parks, the close cousin of the visual politics of race. Parks attempted in his photographs of black Americans to restore the racial content to fashion photography, and vice versa. He unveiled a mutual interdependence in the popular visual field that white bourgeois culture has suppressed and continues to suppress. Of course, this is not to say that Parks was the first photographer to note the close relationship between racial politics and the fashion industry, nor even the first African-American photographer to do so. In fact, I would argue that the confluence between fashion and race forms a central conceit of the long visual history of civil rights in America that persists into the present day.

For example, when African-American photographer James VanDerZee opened his Guarantee Photo Studio in Harlem in 1917, he began what would be a decades-long career devoted to photographing Harlem’s robust black middle class. Known for reproducing in his studio portraits the stock poses and clothing found in popular white fashion, film, and celebrity magazines, VanDerZee staked a claim for black cultural and economic achievement.<sup>6</sup> Reduplicating white taste, his portraits aim to demonstrate that black Americans can wield the symbolic social power of fashion just as effectively as white middle-class Americans. If for white Americans one is what one wears, then VanDerZee’s portraits suggest that the same logic must apply to black Americans. VanDerZee’s “overtly, aggressively middle class” portraits are the visible sign, or even the *guarantee*, of political and economic liberation for black men and women dressed in their Sunday best.<sup>7</sup> In VanDerZee’s work, fashion is destiny.

VanDerZee intuited, even if he did not explore, the closely bound visual politics of self-determination inherent to both fashion and race in the United States.<sup>8</sup> What VanDerZee did not recognize, or chose to ignore, were the lived material realities to which most black Americans remain subject no matter how well they might dress, and his mistake was made painfully clear when images of the violent unrest in the South began to emerge two decades later.<sup>9</sup> In effect, VanDerZee confused the class aspiration of conspicuous consumption for the political aspiration of social equality. Parks examined

closely what remained unprocessed in VanDerZee's portraits, namely the uneasy blending of class aspiration, racial inequality, and the politics of self-determination through fashionable attire. Unlike VanDerZee, Parks rarely mistook class aspiration for the quest for racial justice, even if they closely resemble one another. Parks's photography charts the territory of the "Negro's great stumbling block," the bourgeois borderlands where the worlds of white consumer fashion and black American life meet.

Parks's career was facilitated by and responded to the advent of affordable and versatile ready-to-wear fashion in the midcentury United States, and in the postwar era, new modes of clothing production, design, and marketing would come to play a vital role in the visual rhetoric of civil rights photography more broadly. Commercial fashion photography had pervaded the pages of middlebrow lifestyle publications since their inception, but its guiding consumer ethic—that one is what one wears—would take on a more acute meaning in depictions of the civil rights struggle. The fashion industry, including fashion photography, would lay claim to a ready-made ethics that articulated a new relationship between modes of dress and modes of being. *Life* was a major player in disseminating the "American Look" of the postwar fashion industry, a design ethos that emphasized self-expression and self-determination through factory-made, versatile, interchangeable garments.<sup>10</sup> The new American style of postwar fashion emphasized the democratic qualities of ready-to-wear clothing, and, fashion scholar Annemarie Strassel argues, was a crucial "conduit to women's physical and social liberation."<sup>11</sup> I argue that the new consumer-forward fashion industry was, as well, strategically adopted and deployed by the global civil rights movement as a means of engaging the slow-to-act white middle class, and it is in the photography of Parks that we see most powerfully the shape that this strategy was to take.

Parks understood with remarkable insight what subsequent photographers of the civil rights struggle could not help but notice. Within the archive of the most widely circulated photographs of police violence against black Americans in the early 1960s, officers or their dogs grab vicious hold of the clothes of black men and women. A graphic pattern emerges across these photographs of the civil rights era wherein (white) violence is expressed in the rending, soaking, and seizing of (black) clothing. For example, in Charles Moore's 1963 *Life* magazine photo-essay, "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham: They Fight a Fire That Won't Go Out," a two-page spread documents two police officers and their dogs attacking a well-dressed black man.<sup>12</sup> In the three photographs, the two dogs are seen with their teeth locked on the man's clothing, pulling and tearing his pants from his legs. Together these photographs present a visual narrative of shocking, if not tragic, exposure and hyper-visibility. The people in the Birmingham photographs are not just any black Americans under attack, but *well-dressed* black Americans whose very personhood—in the form of clothing and its presumed class protections—is being violated. The truth that is here revealed is that respectable, middle-class fashions can be, on black bodies, reduced to *mere clothing*.

As much as these images depict overt racism, they also depict violent affronts to bourgeois notions of decency and propriety. The widely distributed Birmingham photographs draw upon the sartorial sympathies of bourgeois class affinity to overcome the

792 sense of racial difference. As Leigh Raiford observes in her study of the Birmingham photographs, it is “other black youths . . . [n]ot so properly attired or as well-behaved” who are ultimately “excised . . . from the documentary evidence of those events.”<sup>13</sup> In the pages of mainstream outlets like *Life*, exposing the vulnerable black flesh that lies beneath stylish, respectable clothing carries enormous rhetorical and political weight, even if it comes at the expense of perpetuating the image of black Americans as victims.<sup>14</sup> Nor is it a coincidence that organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee put such a strong emphasis on how their members dressed for protests.<sup>15</sup> The spectacle of seeing fashionable dress reduced to vulnerable fabric puts the lie to the white bourgeois belief that self-expression was a viable route to genuine liberation. The symbolic protections of fashion, these photographs seem to say, can easily be revoked by institutional authorities and reduced to torn, wet rags.<sup>16</sup>

My analysis of Parks’s work reveals that fashion is distinguished from clothing by fashion’s inescapable class and racial dynamics.<sup>17</sup> I argue that his photography allows us to recognize that the distinction between “fashion” and “mere clothing” hinges not on the trend-driven fickleness of the consumer marketplace, but on the underlying historical-political transformations in conceptions of personhood that support the commercial fashion industry. As Giorgio Agamben says of “bare life,” I contend in this article that the “mere clothing” of some people functions as the limit case of personhood that makes the politics of self-expression possible for others.<sup>18</sup> Clothing, as distinct from fashionable attire, resides in lives stripped down to pure subsistence, pragmatism, and function. Parks, in both his commercial fashion photography and in his documentary photography of black American life, explored and exploded the distinction between “fashion” and what I am calling “mere clothing.”

## Ella Watson’s Dress

In one of his earliest in a series of photographs of charwoman Ella Watson, *American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942*, Parks draws what seems at first to be a heavy-handed visual contrast between mainstream national ideology and the politics of race and class (fig. 1). The charwoman, Ella Watson, stands in a poorly mended dress and holds a broom in her right hand. A mop rests just behind her left shoulder, and an American flag hangs on an office wall in the background. Parks himself thought the photograph “unsubtle” and expected Roy Stryker, head of the Farm Security Administration’s photographic division, where Parks was then on fellowship, to reject it out of hand.<sup>19</sup> Riffing on the iconographic populist imagery of Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (1930), Parks replaces the gaunt couple standing in front of a bucolic farmhouse with a single black charwoman standing in a starkly lit government office building at night. The idyllic national myth embodied in the gothic farmhouse and puritanical dress of Wood’s couple is replaced with Parks’s uncomfortably direct pairing of the American flag with a middle-aged working black woman. But what would it mean to read this



▲  
Fig. 1. Gordon Parks, *American Gothic*, Washington, D.C., 1942. Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

photograph as fashion photography and to infuse Watson's "mere clothing" with the symbolic resonance of fashion?

Reading fashion into the photograph discloses by contrast the sartorial fetishism of Wood's painting. The pristine, tightly manicured clothing of the couple in Wood's work gives way to the asymmetrical, worn, obviously mended dress of Ella Watson. If Wood's primly dressed figures conjure a familiar but mythically distant time and place, then Parks's comfortably clad subject speaks to the invisible and immediate present—that which is standing right before one's eyes every day and yet remains perpetually unseen. Parks photographs Watson at night, emphasizing the casual elision of her presence from the daytime hours of other office employees' workday. In a series of related photographs,

794 Parks also shows Watson placing paper trash into a waste bin, rinsing a sponge in a sink, and sweeping an office floor. Not only is her job unseen by the majority of those she works for, but the very job she performs (cleaning) is an elision of human presence. In other words, the quality of her work is measured by the degree to which it goes unremarked, and what she is shown to be wearing might seem at first glance further proof of her unremarkable occupation.

However, Parks makes visible, through an emphasis on texture and fabric, the structures designed to elide black female labor. His *American Gothic* is an act of disclosure, but it is a disclosure of that which is already intimately familiar; it is unveiling the invisibility of the everyday. Following Roy Stryker's suggestion, Parks met his subject, Ella Watson, working in the same government offices that housed the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Parks continued to document her at home and photographed her apartment, her family, her church, and her neighborhood, documenting the mundane places and acts of her daily life, undoing the ideological and material elision of her job and social position.

If Watson's work negates her own presence, her dress in the *American Gothic* photograph negates that negation. It testifies to her presence by its obvious distress. It disguises nothing; it makes Watson's labor visible through its obvious scars and sutures. While this photograph might not be commercial fashion photography—since Watson's dress could not be bought or sold—it is also not *not* fashion photography. Her dress hovers in the transformative instant between fashion and clothing. The photograph dares its viewers to transmute her dress into the “bare life” of pragmatic and functional clothing. Her dress signifies working classness while simultaneously deploying the visual tactics of fashion photography to different ends. In striking ways, Watson's dress recasts Claire McCardell's well-known “monastic dress” that debuted in 1938 and came to signify much of the midcentury “American Look.” According to Strassel, McCardell's signature silhouette, collar, and cinched waist allowed for “self-determination in a literal sense, allowing for women to choose a *fit* suitable to individual taste or body shape” (“Designing Women,” 44). Watson's dress certainly echoes McCardell's design but also one-ups it in its exaggerated functionalism, versatility, and personalized fit, while Watson's dress simultaneously retains its obvious state of distress and need for constant re-tailoring. If I say that Watson's dress has a “style,” it is a style that brings to the surface the social conditions of its wearer.

The after-hours, chiaroscuro lighting lends the photograph a staginess and artificiality closer in tone to Parks's earlier department store fashion work than to the documentary style of other FSA photographers. Ella Watson's dress and figure anchor the image, while the surface textures and visual patterns of the flag, mop, and broom bring into relief the draping and material construction of the dress. Watson's dress appears to have been resized and refitted many times. Two buttonholes lay unused over her left breast; the two overlaying pieces of fabric have been sewn together instead. One of the unused buttons for an unseen third buttonhole has been folded inward at her neck to form a more comfortable v-line. At her waist, two buttons have been added to take in (albeit unevenly) what had once likely been a larger waistline. A single tear in the fabric just



to the left of the lower of the two buttons testifies to the age and imperfection of the alteration. In another photograph, Parks shows a full head-to-toe image of Watson in the same dress, revealing overstuffed pockets, loose work shoes, and a torn hem. Her dress is a palimpsest of its repeated refashioning.

*American Gothic* foregrounds fashion, but as its negation, and in doing so, the photograph also attempts to remake radically the racialized surface structures of desire upon which the fashion industry is built. As I have argued above in my discussion of VanDerZee's portraits, commercial fashion relies on and generates a desire for a direct correspondence between essence and appearance, and it encodes that desire as a desire for a specifically white essence by way of white clothing. What Frantz Fanon calls in another context the "quest for white flesh" is, in the world of commercial fashion, also the quest for white *fashion*, a way of looking that is also a way of being (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 81). Race and class aspiration come together in this photograph; consumer desire here confronts its limit case. Parks short circuits the conduits of marketing and cultural capital that exclude blackness from consumer desire; however, this is no call for inclusion. He does not present "black fashion" as an extension of white bourgeois fashion as had earlier portraitists like VanDerZee, nor does he present it as an alternative to "white fashion" as would later movements like Black Is Beautiful; rather, he directly challenges the tactics of fashion photography itself.<sup>20</sup> The image frustrates desire. The dress appears as though it could be used and reused forever through an endless series of minor alterations, standing defiantly outside the circulation of commodities. Watson's face, too, frustrates desire in its refusal to emote for the camera; her affectless indifference resists the pathos so strongly associated with the other well-known faces of the FSA archive, in the work, for example, of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. Instead, the photograph draws upon what Caroline Evans calls the "modernist ethic of alienated impersonality and emptiness" of the professional mannequin or fashion model, what Jessica Burstein terms more simply "cold modernism."<sup>21</sup> What Parks perceived as his photograph's lack of subtlety is also its unflinching directness; his subject dares us to look through and beyond everyday ways of seeing. If the photograph appears to be an act of disclosure, it is only because so few would notice a cleaning woman like Ella Watson—even if she is staring them squarely in the face or working just down the hall. Through his photographs of Ella Watson, Parks unmasked the ideology of beauty imbricated within social reality, and for him, nowhere was that ideology more evident than in the overlapping visual realms of commercial fashion and documentary photography of African-American life.<sup>22</sup>

### The Department Store and the FSA

Prior to his even buying a camera, Parks was fascinated by the photography in the pages of *Vogue*, and when he first saw the "grim paintings of the jobless and oppressed" at the Southside Community Art Center in Chicago, Parks was troubled by their contrast with the "pink ladies of Manet and Renoir . . . hanging at the Art Institute several miles to the north on Michigan Avenue" (*A Choice of Weapons*, 194). He also



796 met a Minneapolis painter, Mike Bannarn, who told him, “I get just as riled up over preserving the beauty of things as I do about destroying the ugliness of them” (195). In Parks’s work, Bannarn’s dictum is taken further by conveying the ways in which these two aesthetic goals are dialectically entangled in one another in the worlds of fashion photography and racial politics. Parks is just as likely to “preserve” the ugliness of things in his photography as he is to “destroy” the beauty of them.

Prior to joining Stryker at the FSA, the young Parks found institutional and professional support in commercial fashion work. His first major break was a job working for Frank Murphy’s department store in St. Paul photographing models wearing fashion merchandise. According to Parks, it was while doing fashion photography for Frank Murphy’s that Marva Louis—the fashion-conscious wife of professional boxer Joe Louis—first saw Parks’s work and encouraged him to head to Chicago and pursue photography seriously. The importance of this meeting to his career is stressed often by Parks as well as by others, but what goes universally unremarked is the racial dynamic at work. The American fashion industry in the early twentieth century traffics in images of white women, and as some critics have remarked, modernist-inflected clothing design in the first half of the twentieth century is deeply invested in the idea of “pure” whiteness and blackness as foundational principles, a tonal contrast further emphasized by the industry’s close partnership with black-and-white photography.<sup>23</sup> In this encounter between Parks and Louis, whiteness (and especially white womanhood) functions as a point of professional and social connection between a black man and a black woman. Fashion photography allows the African-American pair to navigate in relative safety the racial conduits of social capital by translating the explicit language of socioeconomic achievement into a tacit language expressed through images of fashionable white women. In his two chapters on interracial desire in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes both the black male desire for white women and the black female desire for white men as expressions of racially inflected class aspiration.<sup>24</sup> The social dynamics of Fanon’s claim are crystalized in the connection between Parks and Louis, for whom images of fashionable white women form the core of consumer desire and social aspiration.

Parks’s commercial work also provided him his first major break as an “artistic” photographer in the form of a fellowship funded by a Sears, Roebuck department store executive. The young photographer never strayed far from his commercial roots. Upon his arrival at the FSA offices in Washington, D.C., Parks recalls, his first assignment was to leave his cameras in the office and go “walk around the city” and “buy [himself] a few things.” After being shooed from a drugstore food counter and a theater, Parks headed to a department store that he had chosen because its name “had confronted [him] many times in full-page advertisements in fashion magazines.” He surmised that “[i]ts owners must have been filled with national pride—their ads were always identified with some sacred Washington monument” (*A Choice of Weapons*, 223). Parks recognizes commercial photography as a clear distillation of the nation’s racial politics played out in the visual language of consumer culture and national iconography: inside the department store, when white salesmen refused to help him find a coat, Parks decided to “[sprawl] out leisurely” on a couch and wait for a manager, “[his] blackness stretched

across the white couch command[ing] attention" (225). Where in his earlier interaction with Marva Louis commercial fashion had provided a common visual language of social aspiration, here Parks adopted the bodily language of the fashion pose as a form of playful resistance and self-fashioning. He knew, unlike VanDerZee, that posing like a white fashion model did not make him one. In this story of his first photography assignment, Parks figures himself as the subject of a powerful and challenging image—striking a feminine fashion pose that transgresses both race and gender lines.

The novelist Ralph Ellison, a close friend of Parks, later gave an account of such playful transgressions in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." Ellison claims that black Americans can more readily recognize and capitalize on the ambiguities built into racial (and, I would add, sexual) boundaries than can other Americans. He reminds his readers that it is the "advertising industry"—including, of course, fashion photography—that "makes clear [that] that which cannot gain authority from tradition may borrow it with a mask." Further, "the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity," but "[s]ometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke."<sup>25</sup> Parks's anecdote doubles as its own sort of playful "pose." Parks was a compulsive, and frequently unreliable, autobiographer who refashioned his personal life across multiple books, films, photographs, and poetry. In other words, the exaggerated pose he struck on the couch in the department store is every bit as much a self-conscious pose for his reader as it is for the white men in the store. It is a deliberately "queer" pose that stands in direct opposition to the "straight" white poses adopted by James VanDerZee. Drawing on his earlier experience as a department store photographer, Parks appropriates, in a remarkably Ellisonian way, the sexualized semiotics of fashion in order to bring its underlying racial politics to the surface in the form of a joke.

Back in the store, when the manager finally arrived, he talked with Parks for a while but still offered no assistance with a coat. When he left, Parks remained lounging on the white couch until "[s]uddenly [he] thought of [his] camera" (*A Choice of Weapons*, 225). He did not find a suitable subject for this flash of inspiration until two weeks later when Roy Stryker pointed Parks in the direction of Ella Watson mopping the hallway in the FSA offices.

### **Clothing and Nothingness**

After working for Stryker through much of the 1940s, Parks began a long career at *Life* magazine with his photo-essay "Harlem Gang Leader." Simultaneously, he shot his first fashion series for the magazine, "New Furs," shooting the fashion spread during the day and the gang photographs in the evening.<sup>26</sup> In these two series of photographs for *Life*, Parks continues to combine a banal disclosure of everyday social reality with the visual language of fashion photography. In one of the unused and untitled "Harlem Gang Leader" photographs, a young woman hangs a patterned smock to dry (fig. 2). She stands a few stories up on a small balcony in a Harlem apartment building. She occupies the lower right of the frame, while the majority of the rest of the frame is

798 filled with the many dozens of items of clothing hanging in an empty lot between her building and the next. Full clotheslines stretch into the distance behind, above, and below her single smock. The woman herself wears only a petticoat and a short-sleeved blouse with a loose tie at the neck. Hands on the clothesline, she could either be pulling the smock in or setting it out. Nor is it clear whether her visible petticoat is the result of just having put this smock out to dry, or if she is just about to put it on. Its billowing fabric highlights the texture and pattern on the smock, and only it and the woman are completely in focus in the photograph. Her semi-nakedness and the smock's emptily filling with air tease at a visual connection, borne of the figure's ambiguous state of dress and undress.

There is an after-hours quality to the moment, much like seeing Ella Watson working in the FSA offices at night. The photograph captures what might seem like a vulnerable moment, but the young woman seems undisturbed by the photographer's presence, going about her everyday work in her underclothes. The clothing she wears and the clothing hanging beside her remind us visually of the acts of dressing and undressing, and yet she seems in no hurry to hide herself either by dressing or by returning inside. The sense of an unhurried suspense—between dressing and undressing, hanging and pulling down the clothes, drawing the clothesline in or out—is further emphasized by the woman's unaffected expression and by the smock's gentle billowing. There is no great shock or revelation at play; the photograph denies the possibility of voyeurism or even of sociological fascination, let alone anything like consumer desire. The dully white and amorphous hanging clothes that occupy the majority of the photographic space infuse the moment with lackadaisical insouciance, which may even explain why the photograph didn't make it past *Life's* editors and into the magazine.<sup>27</sup> It is a photograph that almost literally reveals nothing, even in what seems like a revealing moment.

The subject of the photograph is what we cannot see, and the human figure's eyes direct us to it. It is an intellectual tease that invites viewers to guess what might be beneath the smock. Her eyes look behind and below the hanging smock at some unidentifiable and unseen item of clothing. We see only the smallest edge of whatever it is, just enough to see its color tone and to get some sense for the texture and quality of the fabric. It appears heavy and thick and as grey as the drab brick wall behind the woman. A double contrast thus emerges at the center of the image: the first contrast is between the air-filled smock and the half-undressed woman, and the second is between the light, billowy smock and the heavy, dark, unseen item. Like the *American Gothic* photograph, this unpublished photograph emphasizes the sense of something deeply inaccessible about the woman, while simultaneously suggesting that whatever it is must be utterly banal. If the photograph of Ella Watson resists the burden of racial signification by invoking the surface ethics of the bourgeois consumer, we see in this photograph a similar frustration. The social subject of the photograph, if ever there was one, disappears behind an image of non-spectacular urban blackness, a position historically denied black Americans. This photograph presents the very real possibility that while readers busily look for the racial "meaning" of the photograph—especially considered within the framework of its more titillating "Harlem Gang Leader" subject



▲  
Fig. 2. Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, 1948. Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

matter—they miss the workaday presence of the woman herself. Clearly Parks’s editors missed it too.

Not only is the half-dressed young woman unbothered by the presence of the photographer, but she is occupied with something he cannot see. As much as the photograph might initially seem to be a disclosure of this woman’s private life, it has the effect of showing just how little this woman’s life can be pried into no matter how dull or mundane the object of her interest. The everyday intimacy of her life is on display, and even though something remains hidden behind the smock, we can safely assume that its revelation would only offer yet another layer of banality. Like Ella Watson, she is exposed without being exposed. The photograph dismantles the logic of bourgeois desire, revealing the fact that it reveals nothing. The smock’s “empty fullness” is both an impenetrable veil and a completely transparent window into the everyday familiarity of the young woman’s action, resisting the racially-inflected interpretive hermeneutic (or voyeuristic pathology) of the distinction between fashion and mere clothing. The

800 photograph teases at teasing, deflating common visual tropes of consumer desire and documentary voyeurism.

In the fashion photographs he took during his daylight hours, Parks deploys a similar—albeit more conventionally commercial—approach to the visual tease and inverts the logic seen in the photograph of the Harlem woman doing laundry. The photos of fur-clad white women stage a seeming candidness and give the dim impression of having been taken without these women being aware, as if they were on their way somewhere. In contrast to Ella Watson and the woman handling her laundry, there is no obvious “work” being documented, no invisible life being made visible. These are women posing in recreated moments of accidental revelation, fashionably luxuriating in the pleasure of empty time. The women all look out of frame and away from the camera, affecting a feigned indifference or modest lack of awareness at being seen wearing stylish furs.

The third photograph in the fur series presents a typical Parks affinity for expressionist detail and uncanny juxtapositions that provide an instructive contrast to the Harlem photograph of the woman doing laundry (fig. 3). A woman in furs rests with her back to a department store window. A few white flakes of snow have settled into the bits of blonde hair peeking from beneath a white scarf wrapped tightly over her head. Her white-gloved hands are crossed into the folds of the oversized white fur coat, and she stares off into the upper left of the frame. It is a pose of self-possession, of a woman with nothing but her thoughts, wrapped by her own arms and warm coat. Parks, however, gives us more. Dividing the frame in the center is the window against which the woman leans. While she rests comfortably and confidently on the left side of the window, her reflection rests on its right. Just inside the window is a headless male mannequin. The effect is one of mutual regard, as though her reflection and the mannequin are sharing a longing gaze. Perhaps influenced by the ongoing project of New York Photo League member Lisette Model, whose series of “Reflections” deployed very similar visual effects, Parks found here in urban reflections a technical means to restage and reflect the surface qualities of commercial fashion display.<sup>28</sup> The blankness and seeming self-assurance of the woman outside the window is belied by the effect being played out in the window. The fact that the mannequin is headless further unsettles the woman’s gaze. If the woman’s pose appears self-possessed, it also discloses a blank interiority. This is a death-like gaze, shared between two inanimate things seeing one another as commodities, mystically transforming the material reality of the mere fabric and fur they each wear into the rarefied substance of stylish consumer merchandise: that is, fashion.

In Walter Benjamin’s section on fashion in *The Arcades Project*, he points to “a biological theory of fashion” suggested by a zoologist’s account of zebra fur:

The most ancient of the existing animal types have conspicuously striped coats. Now, it is very remarkable that the external stripes of the zebra display a certain correspondence to the arrangement of the ribs and the vertebra inside. . . . Isn’t it likely that we are dealing here with outward stimuli for internal responses, such as would be especially active during the mating season?<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 3. Gordon Parks, *City Snow Fashions*, New York, New York, 1949. Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

While Benjamin in the passage gives no direct explanation for his interest and leaves the claim unanalyzed, he does elsewhere suggest that modern fashion expresses internal truths, and he frequently repeats the idea that women's fashion is "secretly link[ed] up with the corpse" (*The Arcades Project*, 79). In Parks's images of women in furs, we see a literalization of that link: these women are wearing the skin and fur of dead animals. Moreover, Benjamin draws out the interiority onto the surface in a moment of desire: an animal's innards reappear in the patterns of its fur to facilitate mating. In the folds and textures of these women's furs lies a field of desire, death, and fashion.

In this respect, there is an imperfect, but no less fundamental, homology between the visual logic of Parks's fashion photography and his documentary photography. In another of his "Harlem Gang Leader" photographs, Parks shows us an image of an actual corpse, elegantly dressed and surrounded by the lush, deep, white fabric of his



802 coffin. The sharply dressed gang leader Red Jackson and one of his friends stare down into the open casket, Red's friend peering out and over the coffin as though staring down from the edge of a tall building. This tableau makes explicit what is only obliquely suggested in his image of the woman in white fur. Parks, like Benjamin, seems to recognize that "fashion was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver," but more, Parks sees in that parody of death the means by which the American racial imagination might be *refashioned* (63). If fashion, like the racial imaginary, depends on a deeply fraught distinction between the coarse inorganicism of clothing and the numinous aura of fashion-conscious desire, and if "[t]he fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is [fashion's] vital nerve," then Parks seeks to undo the racial power of fashion by parodying it, too, and infusing it with banal mystery (79). In Parks's work, inequality and injustice are not there to be uncovered in moments of exceptional violence, and the logic of fashion reminds us that mystery and desire are only so much smoke and mirrors—what Benjamin calls "phantasmagoria."<sup>30</sup> There is indeed something beneath the surface of things in Parks's photography, but it is only what is already there in plain sight.<sup>31</sup>

### The Canniness of the Racial Uncanny

The incongruous combination of banality and suggestive mystery becomes the signature of Parks's depictions of black Americans. If for Freud, one might grasp the experience of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, by way of a greater attention to the familiar, or *heimlich*, then for Parks, one might work in reverse to convey the ordinariness of blackness through a closer examination of the seeming mysteries of consumer desire. Mannequins and dolls, in particular, continued to appear in Parks's photographs as hinge emblems of the interrelated visual tropes of race, social aspiration, and fashion.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps most famously, in his photo-essay for *Ebony* covering the well-known doll experiments conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940s Parks showed in stark black and white the power behind the visual politics of race. The "doll test," as it has come to be called, asked young African-American children to make judgments about beauty and morality based on the single variable of simulated skin color in two dolls. Parks's photographs for *Ebony* capture the sharp delineation. In one photograph, a young black child cradles a white doll uncomfortably in his arms while a black doll sits unattended beside him on a table.<sup>33</sup> In the lead photograph, the same boy is presented with two dolls, one black and one white, and he points clearly with his finger to the white doll as he looks up at an out-of-frame scientist, in seeming deference, wanting to make the right choice. (fig. 4)

The tragedy of the photograph derives from the boy's apparent misreading of each doll's skin color with respect to its presumed inner character. Viewers are thereby pulled into the surface politics of color at work in the photograph. If viewers recognize the boy's act as a "symptomatic" misreading of essence, then they, too, become caught up in the same tangled visual web that seems to have trapped the boy. I here make reference to Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's account of "surface reading" to point out that





▲  
Fig. 4. Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, 1947. Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

the sociopolitical limitations of surface reading as a method are the same sociopolitical limitations binding the young boy in this image; he is caught and interpellated by the authority of empiricism.<sup>34</sup> Parks captures the uncertainty visible in the boy's divided attention—his finger points to the white doll while his eyes look to the out-of-frame researcher—and reflects that uncertainty in the formal composition of the photograph as a visual dissonance between white and black, and between fleshy and plastic, skin. The boy is seeking authoritative confirmation of his deduction about the proper correspondence between essence and appearance, intuitively recognizing that his conclusion is not innate and, thereby, intuitively choosing the symbolic “fashion” of race over its material “clothing,” as it were.

The image of the boy's act of pointing draws upon the shared politics of visibility that informs both fashion and race. The photograph literally represents indexicality in its depiction of the act of finger pointing; however, like the experiment, the unexpected surprise (or tragedy) of the photograph is that it seems to misalign the expected racial

804 politics of visibility. If the boy is visibly black, then why is he pointing to a white doll? Viewers are incorporated into the politics of the photo by being asked to perform our own sort of indexical pointing—perhaps even by burdening the boy and the photograph with being “about” race in the first place—but just as the boy’s finger points in one direction and his eyes look somewhere else, so, too, are viewers’ fingers and eyes divided. The experience of shock, tragedy, or anger on the part of viewers reflects a divide between what we see in front of us and what we think we know must lie behind what we see. But that relationship between surface and depth is precisely what this experiment and Parks’s photograph were both about. Skin is the imagined point where signifier and signified coalesce, where essence and appearance meet.<sup>35</sup> There is nothing behind what we viewers and the boy see except for the rather ordinary threat of guessing wrong. Our “fingers” point to the image while our “eyes” search for authoritative reassurance of reason and sympathy. If the young boy in the image looks out of the frame for affirmation, viewers also must look out of the frame for affirmation of their reasoned and emotional response. Our respective decisions are made under duress of political and social authority embodied by the disembodied absent-presence of the researcher, an authority with the symbolic power to convert everyday “clothing” into stylish “fashion” and undifferentiated flesh into black bodies. The boy’s off-frame gaze at the researcher pleads for affirmation, but is left unanswered; his pointing finger remains a hanging question for viewers.

Parks frequently returned to this sort of hanging question inherent to the visual politics of race. While it might seem initially clichéd to stage such an easy visual contrast as skin color in still photography—especially black and white photography—Parks was acutely aware of the visual politics at play. He draws constant attention to the veil of obviousness to disclose what is hidden right in front of our eyes. “Surface” itself is a veil, and obviousness is its own disguise and its own symptom. Even before meeting the Clarks, Parks homed in on the peculiar contrast of black human figures and white inanimate ones. His FSA photographs of Ella Watson’s home life depict her dark-skinned grandchildren cuddling a white doll between them (*Children with Doll*, Washington, D.C., 1942). He found other inanimate white figures scattered throughout Ms. Watson’s house and neighborhood and composed images that juxtapose black human figures with white dolls, photographic portraits, and religious icons.<sup>36</sup> If these contrasts seem “uncanny,” it is only because repression—both the political and the psychic variety—is an instrument of pushing racial difference beneath the surface, such that it transforms otherwise banal domestic images into photographs now, perhaps unfairly, tasked with signifying “race.”

The juxtaposition, then, between the living black figures and the inanimate white ones in Parks’s photography has an undeniable air of irony. It’s a dismantling of the logic that informed much race photography of the era, well into the civil rights movement photography of the 1960s. When white northerners first began to see images of the racial unrest in the American South during the 1950s and 1960s, there was a pervasive sense of an unearthing, of a sudden emergence of sights unseen, of a tipping point having been reached. White Northern readers of newspapers and magazines expressed

a combination of shock and vindication, a sense that the South's continued wrongdoing was surfacing at last and entering into the light of day.<sup>37</sup> "Race," a simultaneously obvious and hidden signifier, seems to emerge forcefully in these civil rights-era images. If Parks's photography, by contrast, appears anthropological in its excavations and interests, it is because it is pushing against the sense that something otherwise unseen is being uncovered; if it appears surreal, it is because it is pushing against the sense among white middle-class viewers that there is something dreamlike or unconscious about the visible lives of black Americans. As the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* says, "it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When [white passersby] approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."<sup>38</sup> Parks's camera, like Ellison's narrator, confronts the epistemological acrobatics of white bourgeois understandings of race and attempts to lay bare the dreamlike fabric from which the American racial imaginary is sewn.

### Window Dressing

In an especially striking image from a later series for *Life* magazine, Parks mixed and combined multiple optical effects. *Ondria Tanner and Her Grandmother Window-Shopping* (Mobile, Alabama 1956) shows an older woman and a young girl standing mid-frame between two window displays of a clothing store (fig. 5). An array of white mannequins appears in the two displays; the image positions the two black figures between and seemingly among the mannequins, catching them in a phantasmagoria of whiteness and commercial clothing. As in the Clark experiment photograph discussed above, young Ondria points to one of the figures with her finger lightly pressed to the glass. The figure to which she points is hidden behind a large adult-sized female mannequin. There is a strange doubling happening in this moment. Just as the child is being held and protected by her grandmother—from what?—so too is there the sense that a small, child-sized mannequin must be standing just in front of the mannequin-woman, though all we see is its base.

While in the Clark photograph the child looks off-frame to some unseen researcher, in this photograph it is the mannequin that stands out of view. We viewers are asked to fill in the blank and insert a white mannequin where we see none. The photograph appeals to our own intuitive sense of the racial dynamics at work; it asks us to participate actively in the institutionalized commodification of racial difference by projecting what *must be* another white mannequin into the display and into the image. The image, by leaving the figure unseen, asks us to engage in (and with) a politics of race that we feel surely must be there. We understand the ways in which commercial fashion, consumer desire, and racial difference overlap, and we recognize in the older woman's protective gesture and downward glance the inherent danger of the moment. The older woman's uncertain expression can only be for her own, and perhaps our, sake because the girl does not see it, but sees only the mannequin hidden from our view. The haunting presence of the unseen mannequin embodies the response to the girl's expression of



▲  
Fig. 5. Gordon Parks, *Ondria Tanner and Her Grandmother Window-shopping*, Mobile, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

desire. What had been in the Clark Experiment photograph an appeal to social authority here appears as an appeal to ideology itself, expressed through a mute emissary of the commercial fashion industry.

Through its multiple layers of windows and mannequins, the image proliferates reflections and imperfect (or unequal) doubles, replicating and invoking the seemingly uncanny symbolic power of fashion that underlies the structures of segregation specifically and of racism more broadly. However, much as in his other work, Parks carefully orchestrates a banal deflation that countermands the structures of desire and difference built into this image. The lens of the camera must be mere inches away from the front-most window because the window's reflection gives us a dim image of the scene behind the lens: a white woman's foot and calf in a high-heeled shoe, two unattached arms of some mannequin lie in a pile on the sidewalk, and a ghostly image of the photographer himself overlays the majority of the photograph.

What might seem a technical oversight or a bit of photographic amateurism instead shows that Parks had ever an eye to the ironies of his simultaneous positions as a black photographer of white commercial fashion and of black America. The photographer appears in his own image as the grand orchestrator of the scene; the snippets of a white woman's calf and shoe and of a disassembled mannequin testify to his having built what his subjects and his viewers see before them. Echoing his much earlier "queer pose" in the Washington, D.C., department store, he simultaneously poses as photographic model, window dresser, and photographer—a scathingly playful image of one with deific authority over the symbolic power of fashion and racial privilege. As with the photographs of Ella Watson, this photograph of the culture of segregation in the South has the ostensible air of documentary exploration, but with Parks's distinct social allegory. The window immediately in front of the lens, then, functions as a weak mirror that seems to double for the ideological content of the image itself. He digs deeply into the earth only to show us what was already staring at us in the light of day.

In the passage on fashion discussed above, Benjamin cites nineteenth-century legal scholar Rudolph von Jhering, who claims that "fashion moves from top to bottom, not vice versa," despite the fact that many high-class fashions come from the "sewer" and "bear the mark of their unseemly origins" (*The Arcades Project*, 74, 75). It is this singularly modern cycle in fashion ("mere clothing" to street wear to high fashion to mass culture) that Parks confronts. His photography discloses within both the fashion industry and racial politics what André Bazin describes as "change mummified."<sup>39</sup> Parks catches in his images the parallel, but distinct, instants when clothing becomes fashion, and vice versa, and when photographic subjects become laden with racial signification. He flirts with the very "about-ness" of his photographs. His photographs might depict black people in black milieus, but many of his figures push back against the burden of signifying blackness. Invoking the tropes of fashion photography grants his subjects a posed personhood built on the consumerist, by way of modernist, tropes of the mannequin-cum-subject and the massification of high fashion. Blackness threatens to fall away as the primary signifier of his subjects in favor of surface features associated with fashion like style, draping, and texture. Like fashion models (who have become stand-ins for the bourgeois consumer subject at mid-century), his black subjects remain only accessible and significant insofar as they stake a clear relationship to the desires motivating consumer ethics.

Much like his contemporaries in the Frankfurt School, Parks expresses through his work an intimate relationship between consumer culture and politics, but where Frankfurt School critics would argue that this relationship is ultimately a means of disempowerment, Parks's work opens up a more nuanced possibility. If, in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's formulation, "the style of the culture industry . . . is also the negation of style," then by examining Parks's photography, we can see the ways in which race and consumer style might reignite each other in meaningful and politically profound ways.<sup>40</sup> Parks, like the Birmingham protestors and the Black Panthers, incorporates consumer fashion within a broader strategy of liberation and resistance. A closer examination of the flattening of style by means of the culture industry might



808 reveal, counter-intuitively, the deeper strata of the fashion industry's imbrication within the struggle for social equality in the midcentury United States.

Banality is an instrument in the visual politics of racial justice that resists the logic of surface and depth.<sup>41</sup> Rather than buy blindly into a visual politics of sudden emergence, Parks challenges his viewers, who are deeply immersed in the visual politics of consumer culture, to recognize what Fanon calls the "zone of occult instability where the people dwell" (or dress), for "it is there that our souls are crystallized and that our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light."<sup>42</sup> In Parks's midcentury photography, the violence of Jim Crow appears as a violation of self-possession and propriety that reduces consumer fashion to "mere clothing," and racial segregation and racial violence are expressed as everyday experiences embedded in the social fabric of the United States. For Parks, one's claim to the power of fashion is borne of social privilege, not civil rights; it is a claim made invisible by its standing in the shadows of consumer desire, racial inequality, and the bourgeois ethics of personhood. Parks points us instead to the ways in which "mere clothing" is a stand-in for the everydayness of political struggle, a reminder that, in fact, there is nothing exceptional (or deep or hidden) about civil rights, or their violent countermanding.

## Notes

This article owes a large debt to the patient advice and sharp eyes of Sarah Ann Wells and Sarah L. Townsend. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers at *Modernism/modernity* whose diligent feedback and faith in my ideas brought this piece onto its feet. And finally, I would like to thank Z'Étoile Imma and Perin Gurel for their important suggestions at an early stage in this article's development.

1. For an account of Parks's navigation of the demands of producing photographs of black Americans for a middle-class white audience, see Erika Doss, "Visualizing Black America: Gordon Parks at *Life*, 1948–1971," in *Looking at "Life" Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 221–41. For more general accounts of photographic depictions of black Americans for white middle-class viewers, see James Guimond, "Frances Johnston's *Hampton Album*: A White Dream for Black People," in *American Photography and the American Dream* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 21–53; Wendy Kozol, "Resisting the Domestic: News Coverage of Social Change," in *"Life's" America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 139–77; and Wendy Kozol, "Gazing at Race in the Pages of *Life*: Picturing Segregation through Theory and History," in Doss, ed., *Looking at "Life" Magazine*, 159–75.

2. For discussion of the complex class dynamics of *Life* magazine's circulation, see James L. Baughman, "Who Read *Life*? The Circulation of America's Favorite Magazine," in Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*, 41–51; Isadora A. Helfgott, "Art in *Life*: Fashioning Political Ideology Through Visual Culture in Mid-Century America," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 20, no. 2 (2010): 269–94; and Chris Vials, "The Popular Front in the American Century: *Life* Magazine, Margaret Bourke-White, and Consumer Realism, 1936–1941," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 16, no. 1 (2006): 74–102.

3. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *Center for Africana Studies*, University of Pennsylvania, [africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

4. I draw here on Frantz Fanon's suggestion that "white" language is the necessary means to social power for subjugated black citizens and that "to take on a language is to take on a world, a culture" ("The Negro and Language," in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann [New York: Grove Press, 1967], 17–40, 38). Language has long been a primary semiotic field for racial empowerment, alienation, and activism.

5. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left, 1970), 96.
6. Rodger C. Birt, "A Life in American Photography," in *VanDerZee: Photographer, 1886–1983*, ed. Deborah Willis-Braithwaite (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 26–73, 44.
7. Miriam Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism: Verbal and Visual Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 157.
8. While documentary photographers like Aaron Siskind seem to offer a sober corrective to VanDerZee's naïve optimism, photographs like those found in Siskind's *Harlem Document* flirt with the racist tropes of poverty tourism and urban exoticism. Between naiveté and exploitation, it is hard, if not impossible, to find a satisfying middle ground.
9. Since VanDerZee's rediscovery in the late 1960s, curators and critics have attempted to imbue his work with an aura of the "serious" artist by highlighting his proximity to the figures of the Harlem Renaissance, his use of photomontage, and his seeming predilection for offbeat funeral and mortuary images, most notably in the 1978 collection *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. But his work stubbornly resists such treatment for long, since scholars are perpetually thrown back into the overwhelming number of conventional studio portraits of well-dressed black Americans. For accounts of the many different framings of VanDerZee's work in exhibitions and collections, see Margaret Rose Olin, "Putting Down Photographic Roots in Harlem: James VanDerZee," in *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012): 101–30.
10. See Sandra Stansbery Buckland, "Promoting American Designers, 1940–1944: Building Our Own House," in *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, ed. Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005), 99–121, 112, 118.
11. Annemarie Strassel, "Designing Women: Feminist Methodologies in American Fashion," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1–2 (2013): 35–59, 41.
12. Charles Moore, "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham: They Fight a Fire That Won't Go Out," *Life*, May 17, 1963, 26–34, 30.
13. Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 4.
14. As Martin Berger reminds us in his *Seeing through Race*, the spectacle of "unveiling" cuts both ways, since from the perspective of many white segregationists in the South and elsewhere, these photographs revealed the "true colors" of black Americans to the rest of the country. According to the logic of segregation, the depiction of white state violence done to black Americans was, counter-intuitively, a sign of its necessity; segregationists saw in these photographs depictions of black transgression and unruliness. Otherwise, segregationists would argue, why would police need to commit violence in the first place? Such is the circular logic of state violence. See Martin A. Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
15. For more on the politics of the dress code of the SNCC and SCLC, see Tanisha C. Ford, "SNCC Women, Denim, and Politics of Dress," *The Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 3 (2013): 625–58.
16. To be sure, photographs did (and do) circulate in the white mainstream press of violence done to black flesh, but more often than not, physical violence is visually encoded in fabric rather than skin. The well-known image of Emmett Till's mutilated body circulated in the black press, and as Courtney Baker claims, the exceptionality of the image made it all the more difficult for white viewers to reconcile and accept ("Emmett Till, Justice, and the Task of Recognition," *Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 2 [2006]: 111–24).
17. Fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson states directly that "[f]ashion, in a sense, is change" (*Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003], 3).
18. If, as Giorgio Agamben argues, "[l]ife became sacred only through a series of rituals whose aim was precisely to separate life from its profane context," then we might say that fashion only becomes "mere clothing" through its own series of rituals (like spectacular state violence) and that, like Agamben's "bare life," a body reduced to wearing "mere clothing" is outside the law and therefore subject to violence with impunity (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998], 66).
19. Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 230–31.



20. For a well-known account of the slogan “black is beautiful,” see Steve Biko’s published trial testimony in “What Is Black Consciousness?,” in *I Write What I Like: A Selection of His Writings* (Oxford, UK: Heinemann Publishers, 1987): 99–119.

21. Caroline Evans, *The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900–1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 247; Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012).

22. This dialectic directly reflects ongoing midcentury debates among American documentary photographers between the “purpose and clarity” of 1930s-era social documentarians and the “deeper levels of multivocal signification” of those employing newer expressionist techniques (Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal into the Cold War* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999], 224).

23. See Jessica Burstein, “Modernism and the Little Black Dress,” in *Cold Modernism*, 125–50; and Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

24. Fanon, “The Woman of Color and the White Man” and “The Man of Color and the White Woman,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, 41–82.

25. Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 45–59, 54, 55.

26. Barbara Baker Burrows, “The Life Years,” introduction to *Gordon Parks: Collected Works*, ed. Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr. and Paul Roth, vol. 5 (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2012).

27. His editors seem to have wanted a more sensationalized, violent portrait of black American life. Parks did not. He went so far as to destroy the photographic negative of an image of Red Jackson holding a gun in order to keep the editors from using the image against his will (Gordon Parks, *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography* [New York: Doubleday, 1990]). The conflict with his editors over his photographs of Red Jackson is also the subject of a touring exhibition of Parks’s work and a companion book: see Gordon Parks, *The Making of an Argument* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2013).

28. See Ann Thomas, *Lisette Model* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1990).

29. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 73. Anne Anlin Cheng takes the fashion of zebra stripes even further by seeing in their deployment not only the racial primitive, but also “the ideal of abstract mechanization and its implicit celebration of ideal humanity” (“Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 [2009]: 98–119, 112).

30. For Benjamin, phantasmagoria is the manifestation of the world “in the immediacy of [its] perceptible presence” (*The Arcades Project*, 14).

31. Parks grows increasingly fascinated with the power of surface effects. His late photography is almost wholly devoted to abstract images of colored fabric and textured objects. See Gordon Parks, *Arias in Silence* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1994) and Gordon Parks, *Glimpses Toward Infinity* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996).

32. Sara Blair notes a similar constellation of race, commerce, and visibility centered around depictions of fashion mannequins in the photography and fiction of Parks’s onetime collaborator, Ralph Ellison. See Sara Blair, “Ellison, photography, and the origins of invisibility,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Ross Posnock (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 56–81.

33. “Problem Kids: New Harlem Clinic Resoures Ghetto Youth,” *Ebony*, July 1947, 20–25.

34. Best and Marcus’s surface reading and related methods like Franco Moretti’s “distant reading” and Bruno Latour’s “empirical metaphysics” have been taken up and taken on rapidly across a variety of fields and disciplines in the humanities over the past decade. For a recent sampling of lucid critiques of these methods, see David Faflik, “Deep Thought, Shallow Aesthetic: Reading Surface Meaning in Thoreau,” *American Literature* 85, no. 1 (2013): 61–91; Heather Love, “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 371–91; Kristina Straub, “The Suspicious Reader Surprised, or, What I Learned from ‘Surface Reading,’” *The Eighteenth Century* 54, no. 1 (2013): 139–43; and Charles Sumner, “The Turn Away from Marxism, or Why We Read the Way We Read Now,” *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 40, no. 3 (2012): 26–55.

35. For more thorough theorizations of the mediating function of skin, see *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed., Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (New York: Routledge, 2001); Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

36. See, for example, *Improvised Altar*, (Washington, D.C., 1942); *Joseph's New Tomb*, (Washington, D.C., 1942); *Ella Watson with Her Grandchildren*, (Washington, D.C., 1942); and *Two Members of St. Martin's Spiritual Church*, (Washington, D.C., 1942).

37. For recent analyses of the circuit of white Northern photographers taking photographs of Southern violence done to black Americans and publishing them for a white Northern readership, see Martin A. Berger, "White Shame, White Empathy," in *Seeing through Race*, 58–81; Maurice Berger, "'Let the World See What I've Seen': Evidence and Persuasion," in *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 98–137; Erina Duganne, "Getting down to the Feeling: Bruce Davidson, Roy DeCarava, and the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Self in Black and White: Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2010), 94–131; and Leigh Raiford, "Come Let Us Build a New World Together: SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2007): 1129–57.

38. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 3.

39. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 4–9, 8.

40. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 129–30.

41. Parks begins his career in an historical moment when both consumer fashion and racial politics are undergoing rapid changes and emerging as primary loci for bourgeois conceptions of the binary between essence and appearance. While fashion and race would seem to be ideal sites to embrace our current fascination with "surface reading," Parks's midcentury photography anticipates and obviates our critical (re)engagement with surface-depth binaries. Instead, his photography asks us to imagine a more fraught historiography within the evolving discourses of surface and depth that allows for much greater flexibility than the restrained, skeptical models offered by surface reading methodologies alone. As Cheng argues, moving away from the essence-appearance binary in discussions of race is a way of moving away from the double-bind of identity politics that on the one hand deserves and demands recognition, but on the other hand is relegated to an institutional ghetto with little bearing on disciplinary attention to aesthetics ("Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility," 98–101). To bring race "to the surface," so to speak, allows for an engagement with race alongside aesthetics without recourse to so-called "symptomatic" readings. While the recent critical practice of surface reading strategically resists the interpretive compulsion to find meaning "beneath" or "behind" appearances, my reading of Parks's work demonstrates that both symptomatic readings and surface readings grow out of the specific socio-historical conditions that also spawn the postwar fashion industry and the civil rights movement.

42. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 227.